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AUTHOR Didham, Cheryl K.
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ABSTRACT

In order to determine if any innovative changes were occurring in early field experiences and student teaching programs, two surveys were conducted. Directors of field experiences at Ohio four-year colleges and universities were surveyed with 43 out of the 47 Ohio directors responding. Ninety-seven colleges and universities across the United States were also surveyed, with 46 institutions replying. Respondents were asked to provide information on the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. Results indicated considerable variance in the content and operation of the programs, particularly in time devoted to student teaching and overall course scheduling. The majority of schools felt that their strength lay in their field experiences, supervisors, and cooperating teachers. Lack of field experience sites was a problem for large programs, those located in rural areas, or schools sharing geographical areas with several other institutions. A common complaint from respondents was lack of control in selecting cooperating teachers. As institutions are increasingly requiring a number of clinical and/or field experiences prior to student teaching, some schools have experienced difficulty in establishing early field experiences. Some schools have difficulty in complying with state requirements for urban, suburban, rural, or multicultural experiences. (IAH)

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Rethinking Field Experiences:
Designing a Model for the 1990's

Cheryl K. Didham
Assistant Professor/Coordinator of Field Experiences
The Ohio State University at Lima
Lima, Ohio 45804

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RETHINKING FIELD EXPERIENCES: DESIGNING A MODEL FOR THE 1990'S

A major component of a good teacher education program is the field experience. Today early field experiences, as well as student teaching, are required at the majority of teacher preparation institutions. These on-site school experiences have been described as the most important element in professional education (Conant, 1963 and Andrews 1964) with teachers consistently rating student teaching as the single most beneficial course in their program (Haring & Nelson, 1980). However, "many critics have charged that student teaching has failed to evolve much beyond the medieval apprenticeship training model, has not developed a sound theoretical basis, and has no uniform or standard structure" (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). It has been stressed by LaGrone (1965) that teacher preparation was taking a highly randomized approach to field experience. Watts (1987) and Zeichner (1987) also state that no agreed-upon definition of the purpose and goals of field experiences has been confirmed and that much variety exists in the manner that these experiences are conceptualized, organized and implemented.

The number and length of early field experiences has grown in the last 10-15 years. These are offered in a variety of ways ranging from one to two hours per week in the classroom to blocks of five or more weeks with full day schedules. The structure of the student teaching experience, however has not changed much through the years except for the length of time required to complete it.

Schools today are in need of well trained teachers who can meet the needs of a diverse population of students. Teachers need to be up-to-date on a variety of topics and teaching techniques and to be able to implement these in their own classrooms. It only

seems logical that field experiences be designed to facilitate this process. In order to see if any innovative changes were occurring in early field experiences and student teaching programs, two surveys were conducted. All colleges and universities in Ohio which granted four year education degrees were contacted. Surveys were hand delivered to directors of field experiences attending the Ohio Field Directors Forum at the OATE fall conference. A second reminder was sent several weeks later and finally a second survey was sent to the handful of institutions which had not responded. In all, 43 of the 47 Ohio institutions returned the survey for a 91% return rate.

The same survey was mailed to 97 colleges and universities across the United States. A sampling of large state universities and small colleges was included. Forty six responses were received for a return rate of 47%. The survey covered both early field experiences and student teaching. Respondents were asked to share strengths and weaknesses of their programs.

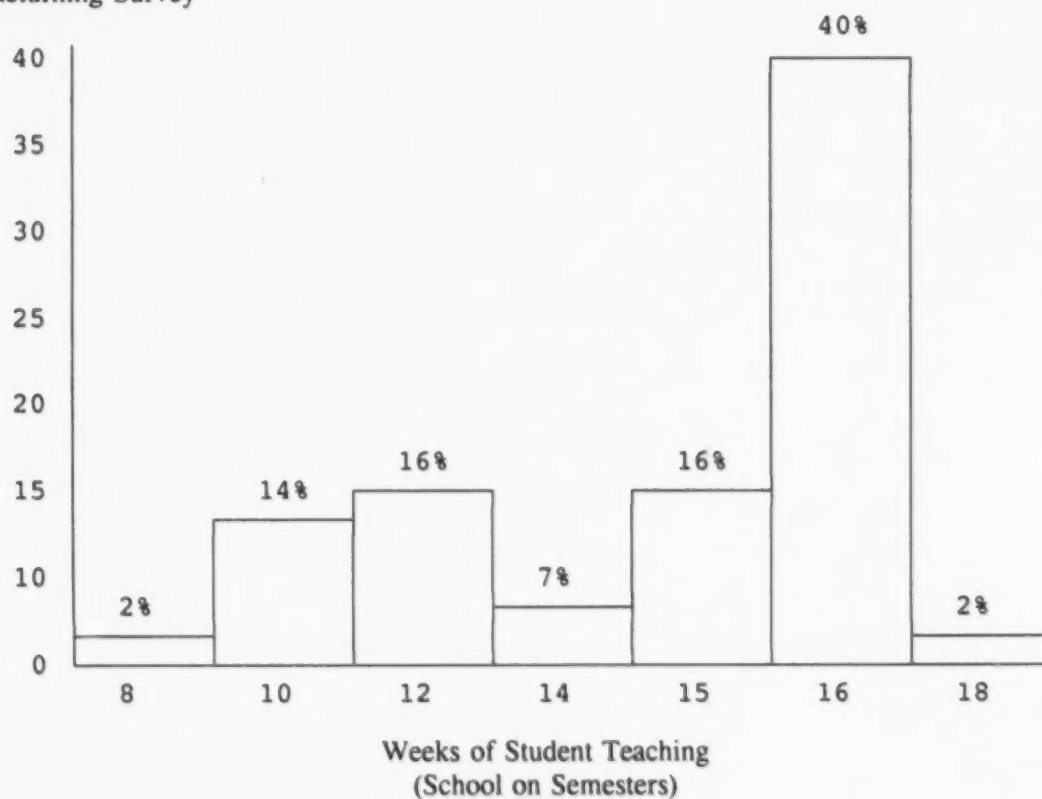
While education programs have many things in common, i.e., required methods courses, early field experiences, and student teaching, the variance within the United States is vast. The majority of schools now seem to be on the semester system-- 42 of 47 national schools surveyed, while 53% of the Ohio schools were on or were converting to semesters. Even though a semester is commonly comprised of 15 or 16 weeks (one week of finals), student teaching experiences ranged from 8 weeks to 18 weeks.

Ohio schools ranged from 7 weeks to 16 weeks with the majority (63%) requiring 10 weeks. Some institutions required less time in schools for secondary majors and graduate students. Requirements set by the state are usually the minimum, as in Ohio which requires 300 contact hours for student teaching (10 weeks). Those schools on semesters can require

more (up to 5 or 6 weeks more) and also have the ability to be more flexible and creative in their design of the student teaching experience.

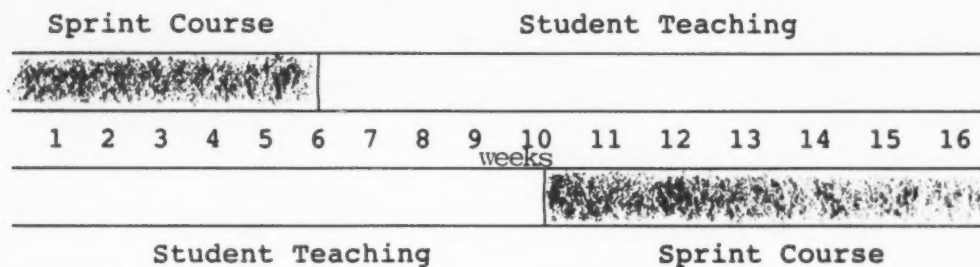
Figure 1
National Survey

Percent of Schools
Returning Survey



If a school on semesters requires only the minimum, say 10 weeks, then students have 6 or more weeks available for other course work or experiences. One popular design is the 6 week "Sprint" course taken either before or after student teaching.

Figure 2



This design is useful in several ways. First, more students can be assigned to a supervisor as there is only an overlap of 4 weeks when one group of student teachers is starting and the other is finishing. Any course not required before student teaching can be intensified and taught as a "sprint". Students are free to take such a course because they are registered for only one other course in that time period -- student teaching. Offering sprints at the beginning and end of the student teaching experience allows different periods of time in the schools and works better for scheduling classroom space. If a sprint is offered at both ends, the classroom scheduled is used 12 weeks instead of just 6.

Methods courses can be combined with the 10 week field placement such as is done in the secondary program at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. This design offers a 6-week methods course with a field component in the same site as student teaching. Students go into the schools 1-2 days per week (these can be full days as no other classes are scheduled) and gradually increase the field experience until student teaching begins. The advantage of this is that the student teacher knows the students and cooperating teacher and can begin to immediately take over classes and duties of the teacher.

Schools that offer double and triple majors (usually special education, i.e., LD,

MH, SBH or hearing impaired degrees) can also be more flexible on the semester plan.

Some examples might be:

double major { 8 weeks first assignment
 8 weeks second assignment

This works also for double placements such as primary and upper elementary grades.

triple major { first semester { 8 - weeks first assignment
 8 - weeks second assignment
 second semester { 10 - weeks third assignment
 6 - weeks sprint class

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The majority of schools surveyed felt that their strength lay in their field experiences, their supervisors and their cooperating teachers. Several mentioned that they had well-trained supervisors or used only full time faculty who knew their students well. Many observed students weekly and/or held weekly seminars.

Excellent working conditions with area schools led to better placements and cooperation between teacher and supervisor. It is argued by Zeichner (1986) that researchers have not paid enough attention to the impact of the different types of classrooms, schools and communities in which student teachers are placed. The regular classroom is not designed to prepare student teachers and making necessary changes is usually beyond the control of the institution. More collaboration with schools will improve the situation. Some institutions

are moving toward professional development schools and/or teacher advisory counsels as a means of improving communication and quality of field sites.

Small schools, with few student teachers per year, were better able to control placements or selection of the cooperating teacher. One small college in Florida only admits top students into their very selective program which requires an international or multicultural field experience for every student. Methods courses are limited to three with the emphasis on content of the discipline, educational and developmental psychology and hands-on experiences in the schools. This program is admired throughout the institution and thought to be most rigorous by colleagues.

Another larger university which needed to cover a lot of territory developed a different design. Ten teaching centers are located throughout the state and are set up as a collaborative model. Clinical supervisors are selected from school faculty with the school and university sharing salary costs. These supervisors work with university faculty in the supervision of student teachers assigned to that center, conduct seminars and often teach courses. Each school also has a Teacher Association Cadre of 5-15 teachers who provide a linkage with the school, act as mentors to the student teachers and receive a stipend from the university. This collaborative model combines university faculty, clinical supervisors and a cadre of teachers who work together at each center.

Weaknesses reported by various institutions differed by size of program. Lack of field experience sites was a problem for large programs, those located in rural areas, or schools sharing geographical areas with several other institutions. Bussing students to sites away from the campus was used in several cases.

Another common complaint from large institutions was the lack of control in selecting

cooperating teachers. Participating teachers may be selected by their administration for various reasons or selection may be controlled by the union. Often teachers have no training in supervision or are not supportive of the university's philosophy or requirements.

Universities with large numbers of student teachers must often take anyone they can get.

Research shows that cooperating teachers who have had training in supervision skills provide a more stable field experience, give more specific feedback and provide a more positive affective experience to the student teacher (Wheeler, 1989).

Some schools cited lack of early field experiences as a problem. More and more programs are moving to a required number of clinical and/or field experiences prior to student teaching. State requirements for urban, suburban and rural or multicultural experiences often prove difficult for some schools. Little is actually known about the effectiveness of the various models of field experiences and often little thought is given to selection of the site as a reinforcer of the goals of the teacher education program (Guyton & McIntyre, 199). Innovative ideas from the survey included bussing students to larger cities where the population is more diverse or collaborating with programs on Native American Reservations or migrant camps. One university in Ohio allows students to complete a summer field experience at various locations because of the difficulty in arranging such experiences during the school year.

While no one from the survey wanted to brag about innovative programs at their schools, such things as flexible scheduling, methods blocks, collaborative models, and scholarships to selected cooperating teachers were all mentioned. It seemed that people were more concerned with small details or logistics than with larger concepts such as new models that could be supported by research.

When given the opportunity to design the ultimate early field experience, educators wanted more time in the schools, better cooperation with teachers and schools, a year long internship, a wider variety of experiences, and better supervision. Perhaps we need to stop and look at what we have before we move ahead. Adding more on-site experiences like the ones now required is not necessarily better. Many times we are tied to schedules and so design our programs around classes and student needs. However, the basic structure of student teaching is nearly universal. Here we have flexibility. Perhaps this is where we should start. Guyton and McIntyre (1990) feel that research in this area is vital.

One must study not only what is occurring but also what should be occurring in the student teacher curriculum. What activities are appropriate for the various levels of field experiences? How should these activities be sequenced and evaluated? Where should they occur? What strategies can be implemented to encourage student teachers to be students of teaching and reflective about their behavior and surroundings? (p. 518).

These questions are a start. Perhaps we can design better field experiences as we search for the answers.

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